

## Tour Report of Prof. Farida Abdulla Khan

Visit to Assam from 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2016 till 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2016

### Introduction: -

1. Member Farida Abdulla Khan went on an official tour of Assam to visit the districts of Kokrajhar, Kamrup and Baksa from 7<sup>th</sup> September till 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2016 to review the MSDP and other schemes for the welfare of minorities. Meetings were also held with members of the State Minorities Commission, the State Minority Development Board and with members of minority communities in Guwahati. A meeting was also held with the victims of the communal violence of April 2014, in district Baksa.

### Visit to Kokrajhar 7 & 8th September 2016: -

2. I arrived in Guwahati at 1.30 p.m on 07/09/2016 and proceeded directly to Kokrajhar accompanied by Mrs. Syeda H. M Rehman, Joint Secretary in the Welfare of Minorities and Development Department.

3. At Kokrajhar a meeting with officials of all departments associated with the MSDP programmes had been scheduled by the Deputy Commissioner Shri Sharma to get an overview of the functioning of the MSDP programmes in the district (Annexure - I).

4. A presentation with details of ongoing projects and utilisation of funds under the MSDP and other schemes was made and problems were discussed (Annexure II). As of now all received funds have been fully utilized, the second instalment of the 11th plan allocation had only just been received and has not yet been disbursed and projects that had to be stalled will now be completed. Officials expressed their dissatisfaction with the delays in receiving funding and felt that the procedures should be made easier. Stalling of projects leads to mounting of costs and subsequent completion becomes difficult and often needs additional funds leading to more delays.

5. A problem brought to my notice concerns the phenomenon of some minority blocks being spread out over more than one district for e.g. there is one such block that straddles both the districts of Kokrajhar and Dhubri whereas the MSDP funds go to Dhubri. The officials would like the funds to be distributed between the two districts on the basis of the population and the needs of the communities falling under each district.

6. It was felt that funds for IAY scheme were not adequate and costs per unit should be increased. Some increase has been effected but it is not applicable to the earlier units where costs have gone up due to delays in receiving the funds. Officials therefore feel that the costs should be disbursed as per the revised norms.

7. On the morning of 08/09/16 I visited the following sites where MSDP projects are under way: -

1. Girls Hostel at Fakiragram,
2. Anganwadi Centre at Baigonbari,



3. IAY House under Kamalsing VCDC,
4. ITI at Ballamguri,
5. Health Sub – Centre at Jambuguri.

8. The funds seem to be well utilized given the constraints that arise out of the delay in release of funds and the red tape involved. The Anganwadi Centre is complete and functional. The girls hostel is an impressive building close to some schools and colleges and would therefore help sustain many students, but is yet to be completed. 25 half built IAY units are lying partially completed since 3 years waiting for funds to be released.

9. It is difficult to comment on the efficacy of the schemes, since there are no institutional mechanism of evaluation and assessment. For example, although officially the MSDP and scholarship schemes funds are fully utilized, there is no mechanism for assessing who the beneficiaries are and how well they represent the appropriate sections of the minorities. There are often complaints from the communities that the scholarships go most often to those who have connections and political representation within the communities. Another complaint is that they are not equally distributed between the various minority communities.

10. The infrastructure alone is not enough to ensure efficacy and several of these schemes end at making infrastructure available. For example, the setting up of ITIs in minority areas is aimed at making them accessible and to give opportunities for minority students to acquire technical skills and therefore open up employment opportunities. However, the admission criteria are usually too stringent for weaker sections to get in and if they are to benefit, some reservations criteria for minorities in such institutions may be required - both for student intake and faculty appointments.

11. I also met with some civil society groups (lawyers, academics and community members) who are working with minorities and those affected by communal violence in these districts and are aware of the problems they face. An issue of current concern and one that was repeatedly brought to my notice is the activity of the Foreigners Tribunals and the process of identifying "illegal migrants" on the basis of "Doubtful Voters". The migration and movement of populations in and around Assam, Bengal and the North East has a long and complicated history and identifying legitimate citizens is not easy nor are the parameters clear cut. The ways in which the exercise is being carried out seems to be delegitimizing large sections of the population who have been living and working in Assam over generations. It is seen as targeting the poorest and the most marginalized who have scant means to defend themselves.

12. Those identified as D-Voters are especially targeted and once they are identified as 'foreigners' they are sent to specially created 'detention' centres. There are also complaints that often these are ex-parte orders where the victims are not given a chance to defend themselves. The fact that increasingly the orders are being challenged in courts and also being reversed after protracted legal battles and years in detention points to serious lapses in the process of identification and a need for a high level review.

13. Given these complaints, I requested to be taken to see a detention centre, and was told that in Kokrajhar since the detention centre was in the process of being constructed, the

'detained' were in the district jail. On visiting the jail, which is housing the women and children I was appalled to learn that these 'detainees' are with other prisoners and no special arrangements have been made for them. I obtained a list of the prison population which lists 97 women "Declared Bangladeshi National / Myanmar " and 13 "Children of declared Bangladeshi" who are incarcerated within the jail amongst other prisoners.

**Visit to Baksa – 8th September, 2016: -**

14. After the field visit in Kokrajahar I proceeded to Baksa where a meeting with the district administration had been arranged at Gobardhana Police Station.

15. Discussion centred around the violence of 2014 in the villages of Khagrabhari where in the aftermath of the violence and arson, the entire village had been evacuated and moved to refugee camps.

16. The district administration reported that following the NCM visit several suggestions had been acted upon and immediate relief measures had been provided. However, several recent transfers have been made in the district and the officials present were not fully aware of the details of rehabilitation or of the other measures taken to protect the community and of the progress of cases against the perpetrators of the violence. They were able to inform me that the cases had been transferred to the NIA but have not kept abreast of the progress of the investigation.

17. A meeting was also held with a group of residents of Khagrabari - all of whom had lost their homes and family members in the violence of 2014. Those present stated that although they had been given compensation to re-build their homes, they have not felt confident and safe enough to return and even now more than two years later it is the men who live there on a more permanent basis whereas the women and children have shifted to safer locations. Given the progress of the investigation and little hopes of justice being delivered, it is not surprising that the residents have no sense of security or any guarantee of physical protection.

18. There is an added problem of access to schooling since the village has only a lower primary school which covers only up to class 3. No effort has been made to provide at least an elementary school or to assure the residents of a permanent police picket, a demand that had been raised during the NCM's visit in 2014.

**Visit to Kamrup Rural District – 9th September, 2016: -**

19. A meeting with the district administration, Kamrup Rural District was held to review MSDP and other minority schemes where I was accompanied by Ms. Salma Ahmad Hussain, Secretary, Welfare of Minorities and Development Department. The meeting was conducted by the DC Mr Vinod Seshan and ADC Ms Sangeeta Saikia. Details of the schemes and their progress is attached in the Status Report, MSDP -11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> Plan prepared by the concerned departments (Annexure III). Schemes like IAY, Anganwadi Centres, classrooms etc. have been covered under the 11<sup>th</sup> plan allocation. Minority blocks of Bezera, Bongaon, Bihdia – Jajikona, Chamaria, Goroimari, Hajo and Rangia are covered under the 12<sup>th</sup> plan and although funds were sanctioned by MOMA vide their letter dated 30/12/2015, they are yet to be released.

20. The funds that were received have been fully and competently utilized and targets have been met. Since the Secretary was present at this meeting the district officials were able to present some of their problems at the state level to her directly.

21. That the schemes do not always benefit those to whom they are targeted remains a problem. Although there is a special fund for awareness programmes, there does not seem to be clarity about how exactly the awareness is done. At present beneficiaries are identified at the panchayat levels and the educational schemes are handled by the Education Department which is also responsible for identification of beneficiaries for the scholarships etc. This is a complaint that comes up in almost all meetings with stake holders.

22. A number of issues were discussed at this meeting regarding MSDP and minority schemes and there was a general agreement that the schemes need to be reviewed and their usefulness and effectiveness needs to be assessed. A number of them have become redundant (the additional classroom scheme for example) or are ineffective in helping minority development. It was felt that some long term and macro level projects like the ITIs, hospitals and colleges with better funding and long term monitoring would benefit the communities more. It was also felt that there is not enough co-ordination between different departments and that funds from the different ministries could be better and more constructively utilized if there is a decision to co-ordinate schemes emanating from different departments and ministries.

#### Meetings at Guwahati – 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2016: -

23. Later, a meeting with members of the Sikh community from Naogaon had been organised in response to the several petitions received from this community. Two Sikh members of the Minority Development Board were present at this meeting. The community consists of Sikhs who have settled in Naogaon district and have been residing in Assam for over a century. They are Assamese speaking and have lost all connections with Punjab from where they originally moved and they consider themselves as native Assamese but feel that they are not recognised as such by the Assamese people or the government.

24. They were informed about the MSDP programmes and asked to establish links with the Sikh Members of the Assam Minorities Development Board. Their major problems are related to their primary occupation - agriculture. They have severe water shortage and other requirements to make the activity viable and urgently need state support for this. They have been demanding that they be given a special status within Assam and some benefits to help them survive and develop. The NCM has supported their demand and it has been brought to the attention of the Government of Assam earlier.

25. Subsequently, a meeting with State Minorities Commission and State Minorities Development Board was held. Shri Abdul Muhib Mazumdar, Chairman and Shri Allen Brooks, Member, Assam State Minorities Commission were present at this meeting along with Sardar Gurumukh Singh and Sardar Ravinder Singh, both Members of the Assam Minorities Development Board.

*JK*

26. The following points were discussed in the meeting:

- a. Members expressed concerns regarding targeting of Muslims under the Foreigners Tribunals and identifying Bengali speaking workers as illegal migrants without enough evidence and justification.
- b. The Christian member mentioned activity of vigilante groups and that Christian Institutions were being targeted.
- c. The demand for expanding the State Commission has been raised before and was re-iterated once again, so that all recognised minorities are represented.

**Guwahati: – 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2016: -**

27. Meetings were held with local academics, lawyers and researchers and other civil society groups to discuss the status of minorities in Assam. Discussions revealed similar concerns as the ones that have been reported, the important and disturbing ones being the rise of vigilante groups that are causing concern to Muslims and the Adivasi Christians and the expansion and the activities of the Foreigner Tribunals, that have been discussed above.

**Recommendations:**

**(A) For MOMA: -**

1. That the MSDP funding be reviewed and local needs be taken into consideration when allotting funds. It seems that some of the schemes that were appropriate earlier – like adding classrooms in schools have become redundant due to investments through the SSA programme.
2. That the scholarship programmes be given extra administrative assistance. For the truly needy to access these funds, there is a need for administrative personnel who can attend to the many problems that are coming up with the digitisation of the schemes and also in assisting students to access the schemes – for e.g. by setting up special windows where applicants can access forms, fill in applications etc.
3. That fund disbursement be made more efficient and the digitized disbursement of funds be carefully streamlined and possible bugs within the system be rectified.

**(B) For the State Government: -**

1. Projects that are funded by MoMA need to be thought through and longer terms and recurrent expenditure that is needed for their effective implementation is put into place. For e.g. in the case of ITI's, funding for running the programmes, appointing faculty, and ascertain that minorities will be adequately represented both at the level of faculty as well as students needs to be thought out in advance.
2. That increased effort be made to reach out and create greater awareness of all the schemes available
3. Efforts are also needed to help the target populations to apply for benefits that are available since these are mainly the poor and illiterate who need support for understanding as well as applying for the benefits.
4. That some means of co-ordinating the funds coming from various schemes and different departments be devised so that they can be better utilised.
5. The issue of identifying illegal residents be carefully reviewed so as not to target helpless and disfranchised sections of Muslim population. At present it seems that large numbers of Bengali speaking people have been picked up and put in detention centres without adequate investigation or notice. This is creating extreme uncertainty and anxiety amongst large sections of the labouring poor.
6. That those affected by the violence in Baksa in 2014 be given some form of police protection in the village and to ensure their safety and that the legal procedures to punish the guilty be expedited. It is a sad commentary that more than two years after the violence there is no enquiry and its follow up.



Farida Abdulla Khan  
Member  
16/09/2016

Annexure – I

**List of officials present in the meeting at Kokrajhar on 07/09/2016 held at the  
Conference Hall of Circuit House**

1. Shri Madhaw Prasad Sharma, ACS, Deputy Commissioner, Kokrajhar
2. Shri Bhaskar Das, ACS, ADM, Kokrajhar
3. Shri B.C. Phukan, IAS, Principal Secretary, BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council),
4. Shri. R. Muchary, Secretary, BTC,
5. Shri A. C. Deori, ACS, Secretary BTC and I/C P.D. DRDA, Kokrajhar,
6. Shri Jagdish Pd. Brahm, IS, Kokrajhar,
7. Shri Jacky Damang, O/o DPE, RMSA, Kokrajhar,
8. Shri Pradip Kandi H., A.E.E, PWD (Bldg.) Gossaogaon,
9. Shri S. K. Parial, E.E. (PHE), Kokrajhar - PHE Div. I,
10. Shri S. Doley, H.E.D.W.O (B), Kokrajhar,
11. Shri H. Thakuria, A.E (Civil), NHM,
12. Shri N. Tayung, AEE (PHE),
13. Shri B. Rai, representing DEEO, Kokrajhar, and
14. Smt. Syeda Hasina M. Rehman, Jt. Secretary, Welfare of Minorities and Development  
Department, Assam